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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 001804

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SUBJECT: PRO-CHAVEZ PARTY CRITICIZES CHAVEZ' CONSTITUTIONAL PROPOSAL

REF: CARACAS 001703

CARACAS 00001804 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES,
REASON 1.4 (D)

¶11. (C) Summary. Leaders of the small, but prominent, pro-government party Podemos outlined their objections to President Chavez' proposal for constitutional changes at a September 7 Caracas party event. Podemos Secretary General Ismael Garcia argued that Chavez' proposals give more power to the state rather than the people. Garcia also took issue with the government's handling of the constitutional reform process, noting the need for more democratic debate "without fear." Chavez appealed to Podemos followers during his September 9 "Alo, Presidente" broadcast to leave their party and join his proposed single pro-government party, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). Podemos' criticism suggests that the December constitutional referendum will be more than a simple contest between Chavez' followers and the opposition. End Summary.

Podemos Takes Aim at Chavez' Proposals

¶12. (SBU) The small but prominent pro-Chavez party Podemos held a well-attended September 7 rally in Caracas to present the party's concerns about Chavez' proposals to change the 1999 Constitution. Podemos Secretary General and National Assembly deputy Ismael Garcia said his party agrees with aspects of Chavez' constitutional changes, but also has "important differences" with the Venezuelan president's proposal. Garcia called the coming months "a sacred hour" for democratic debate among Venezuelans (which should take place) "without any type of fear."

¶13. (SBU) On substance, Garcia said Podemos concurs with Chavez' idea of giving more power to the people through a "new geometry of power." However, Garcia argued at length that Chavez' proposal gives more power to the state at the expense of the Venezuelan people and provides the Venezuelan president exclusive authorities that should be shared more broadly with local officials and the electorate. Garcia also expressed concern that the constitutional changes would eliminate existing mechanisms for local governments to receive and raise funds in order to "resolve problems together with communities."

¶14. (SBU) On process, Garcia said Podemos believes Chavez'

proposals should be voted on separately, and not as a single package as Chavez is insisting. He appealed to the Supreme Court to reaffirm the right of five percent of the electorate to petition for the constitutional changes to be put up to separate votes, per Article 344 of the existing constitution.

The BRV and the National Electoral Council (CNE) are interpreting Article 344 to mean that only the initiator of the constitutional changes, President Chavez, has the right to ask for article-by-article voting of the proposals.

¶5. (SBU) Garcia also argued that Chavez' proposals to allow the creation of twelve new local government entities represents a fundamental change to the constitution. Podemos, like a number of opposition parties, believes such changes would require convoking a constitutional convention and cannot be made through the reform process that Chavez is pursuing through the National Assembly. The Podemos Governor of Sucre, Ramon Martinez, was even more outspoken in his September 7 remarks to the media. He said the current debate is between "revolutionary social democracy and autocracy" and said he opposed the "fingocracy ("dedocracia") of President Chavez."

Chavez Takes Aim at Podemos

¶6. (SBU) President Chavez responded indirectly, but harshly, to Podemos during his September 9 "Alo, Presidente" television broadcast. Chavez said he told the leaders of parties that supported the revolution but have now "tired" that "one cannot be with God and the devil." Chavez appealed to the bases of the pro-Chavez parties that have not joined his United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) to "let the dead bury the dead (sic)" and instead join "the future" by giving "form and life" to the PSUV. Podemos, Patria Para Todos, and the Communist Party continue to refuse to merge

CARACAS 00001804 002.2 OF 002

unconditionally with the PSUV.

Comment

¶7. (C) Although Podemos is a relatively small party, its criticisms of Chavez' proposed changes to the constitution are significant. Chavez is trying to personalize the December referendum as an up or down vote on his rule and as a contest between "revolutionaries" and traditional opposition "oligarchs." Podemos leaders had been stalwart government defenders and consider themselves Chavez allies, so Chavez and other BRV leaders cannot merely dismiss their concerns as the "conspiracies of counter-revolutionaries."

¶8. (C) Podemos was already virtually being treated like an opposition party by the BRV for vocally opposing the PSUV formation process (Reftel). By taking on Chavez' constitutional reforms so publicly, Podemos is likely to be further isolated within the governing coalition. Nevertheless, the party continues to insist that it does not intend to cooperate with traditional opposition parties and is trying to stake out some middle ground in Venezuela's highly polarized political environment.

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